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Coca, Clausewitz, and Colombia: The Inadequacy of Micro-level Studies in Explaining FARC Violence Against Civilians During the Colombian Civil War

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Studies of micro-level violence make various claims to universality: namely, that there are patterns of violence in civil wars that are observable across time and space. The analysis of rebel violence against civilians constitutes one of the enduring themes of these studies. By evaluating the actions of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia's (FARC) during the latter half of the Colombian civil war, this paper demonstrates that the claims of micro-level studies are unable to account for FARC's violence against civilians. In response, this study provides an alternative framework for understanding FARC's violence. Informed by the theories of Carl von Clausewitz it is possible to comprehend the logic of FARC's violence against civilians within a strategic framework that aimed to advance the movement's political goals. However, it also illustrates that FARC was influenced heavily by its involvement in the drugs trade. The main findings are a) that whilst FARC's acts of violence may have contained similarities to that of other drugs cartels FARC did not become a narco-guerrilla organization, b) the case of FARC demonstrates that ultimately there are no reproducible patterns in war, micro-level or otherwise

From 1964 to 2016 the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) maintained an armed revolt against the Colombian government. Founded as a Marxist-Leninist peasant movement FARC evolved into a powerful military force. It generated substantial revenue from the taxation of narcotics and operated a parallel state across vast swathes of the country. Narcotics came to have a significant impact on FARC from the second half of the Colombian Civil War, a period that saw rising levels of violence against civilians. It was this period that transformed FARC from a relatively small rural movement to an organization that presented a severe challenge to the authority of the state in both military and administrative capacity. The argument in this paper is that academic studies seeking to extract generalizable theories about the practice of violence against civilians in conditions of civil war fall short when they are applied to the case of FARC. FARC's creation and association with drug trafficking, and its consequent treatment of civilian

populations in the areas it controlled, arose from specific historical and ideological conditions.¹ Understanding these conditions, this analysis contends, illustrates why micro-level studies of violence against civilians have struggled to provide satisfactory explanations of FARC.

The contention set forth here is not that existing micro-level studies of violence against civilians are without merit. These studies do shed light on aspects of FARC's use of violence. However, as shall be discussed, the attempt to discern generalizable patterns of activity at the micro-level in civil wars reveals the weaknesses of universalistic explanations. By contrast, this analysis critiques universalizing micro-level studies and offers an alternative consideration of FARC's violence against civilians.

Following a brief historical outline of FARC, this study will discuss the ideas advanced by a number of thinkers – Stathis Kalyvas, Claire Metelits and Jeremy Weinstein – who have written extensively on the subject of violence in civil wars, and demonstrate how their theorizations cannot account for FARC's perpetration of violence against the civil populace. The paper will advance a more plausible framework for understanding FARC's violence during the Colombian Civil War. This framework posits a dual approach that, firstly, emphasizes a Clausewitzian understanding of FARC's violence as an extension of politics through war. It will show how FARC's activities validate the thinking of the Prussian soldier-scholar, Carl von Clausewitz's claim that "policy permeates all military operations, and in so far as their violent nature will admit, will have a continuous influence on them."² Secondly, the framework focuses on how the narcotics trade became integral to FARC's identity. The movement's relationship with narcotics shaped its actions and provided the financial means to prolong the civil war, pulling it into conflict with landowners and other paramilitary groups. This augmented system of violence led some academics to accentuate FARC's "criminal" deeds at the expense of understanding FARC's political objectives: an emphasis that does not provide adequate or satisfactory insights into the reasons for FARC's violence against civilians during the war.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to outline how a number of terms will be used in this paper. The term “violence” is defined as any act or behavior intended to cause physical harm or damage to persons or property. FARC employed a varied repertoire of violence during the civil war, and by “repertoires of violence” we mean the types, and relative proportions, of violence that an armed group might use against non-combatants, such as homicide, extortion, kidnapping and robbery.³ By “micro-level” this analysis refers to studies that examine intracommunity dynamics and interactions within small groups and among individuals.⁴ Further, FARC have been described as “rebels,” “guerrillas” and “narco-guerrillas.” The movement bore the hallmarks of all these terms but we do not believe that in and of themselves they are accurate descriptors. We shall therefore use the more detached term of ‘armed non-state actor’ to refer to FARC. Finally, the argument here engages with a literature set that it discerns as “universalistic” in nature, that is to say, studies that advance explanations which seek to account for general behaviors across time and space. The discussion employs the qualifiers “unsatisfactory” and “inadequate” to describe these universalistic theories in that, when set against evidence, they do not sufficiently explain or account for the violent actions of the FARC movement.

The Political Development of FARC

The origins of FARC reside in 1964 in the Tolima foothills when 42 activists took over five small municipalities in the southern part of Colombia. Originally affiliated with the Communist Party of Colombia (PCC), its political goals were large-scale land redistribution and the overthrow of the Colombian government. Since independence from Spain in 1819, Colombian governments led by the Conservative Party enacted land laws mainly to the benefit of the *hacendados* (large estate owners). These laws legitimized land seizures and asserted the rights of private property owners over the peasants (*campesinos*) already living on the land.⁵ In 1926 the Supreme Court ruled that the original land title was the only means to distinguish private from public land,

causing conflict amongst the *colonos* (settlers) who began to resort to violence in order to assert their interests.

The Liberal Party came to power in 1930 after almost 50 years of Conservative rule. In 1932 agrarian reforms were introduced whereby individuals could acquire legal ownership of public lands merely by working the land.⁶ Tensions between Conservatives and Liberals grew, culminating in April 1948 with the assassination of Liberal Party leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, which initiated the period known as *La Violencia*: lasting between 1948 and 1966 and estimated to have caused over 200,000 deaths. During this period attacks against the *campesinos* and forced land-seizures became widespread, compelling rural dwellers and indigenous peoples to form into self-defence groups, often aligned with the Communist Party. The conflict between the Liberals and Conservatives ended in 1958 with the creation of the *Frente Nacional*, a bipartisan arrangement that allowed for a rotating presidency. The *Frente* consolidated control of the state apparatus in the hands of the elites, thus constraining most forms of political activism.⁷ However, violence against the peasantry continued, reinforcing the need for self-defence groups and causing more rural laborers to move to areas like Guayabero and Tolima where these collectives were located.

FARC was constituted formally in 1966 and combined a zeal for agrarian reform along with the organizational and military experience of the Communist Party. Ortiz states: “the agricultural bias for the FARC’s ideological framework reflected the makeup of its leadership and members, which included landless peasants as well as small rural landowners.”⁸ Building on extensive ties with the local population the movement began to displace the state in the areas it controlled. At the Seventh Guerrilla Conference in 1982 FARC added the suffix “EP” - *Ejército del Pueblo* (People’s Army) – to its name and became FARC-EP, thus embellishing its credentials as a revolutionary organization separate from the PCC and signaling the intent to pass from a primarily defensive guerrilla phase to more offensive mobile operations.⁹ At this stage FARC

comprised a small army of some 3,000 personnel, based on a centralized hierarchical structure with a general staff and military code, along with a political program.¹⁰

Throughout the 1980s FARC attempted to establish a legal political wing. The administration of President Belisario Betancur started peace talks with the movement, which resulted in the 1984 Uribe accords, a bilateral ceasefire (1984-87) that enabled FARC to found the *Union Patriótica* (Patriotic Union) (UP). The UP was a coalition of left-wing parties in alliance with the PCC, and achieved some success in the 1986 elections. However, this was to be its undoing. Not only did the UP challenge the bipartisan status quo of Colombian politics but it signified the rising political challenge of FARC. In response, large landowners, the drug cartels and the opposition parties sponsored the formation of paramilitaries, which decimated the UP. Between 1986 and 1990 more than 4000 members of the UP and the Communist Party were killed. The party's first president Jaime Pardo Leal was assassinated in 1987. In the wake of his death, there was a mass exodus from the UP: the party had been crushed.¹¹

In the early 1990s FARC decided it was ready to advance to "mobile warfare."¹² With the door to political participation firmly closed, FARC now had to rely on its military arm. It was in this period that FARC's political rhetoric also altered subtly. Until then, it had threatened the overthrow of the entire political system. This changed to criticizing the government's incompetence in dealing with the country's problems (social inequality, crime, and deficient public services), and presented FARC as the more credible alternative for "good government."¹³ For example, one FARC commander, Simón Trinidad, declared in 1999 that: "the FARC will make better use of the natural resources and provide jobs, healthcare, education and housing."¹⁴

FARC's military strength grew throughout the 1990s. Buoyed by support from the peasantry and funded by income from narcotics the movement continued its military advance. In 1996, FARC destroyed an army base at Las Delicias in Caquetá and captured 60 soldiers.¹⁵ In 1998, the administration of Andrés Pastrana agreed to a *zona de despeje* (demilitarised zone) of 42,000 square kilometres around the city of San Vicente Del Caguan. Portrayed by the

government as ostensibly a goodwill gesture during peace talks, the *zona* underlined FARC's unmistakable military strength while providing the opportunity to administer this region with "good government." Most importantly, it elevated FARC to a different political level. It demonstrated that FARC was not like the drug cartels or the other smaller non-state armed groups. It was a political force to be reckoned with and a potential alternative government.

By 2002, the *zona de despeje* experiment had failed. Continuing high levels of violence, including kidnappings and assassinations, characterized FARC's tutelage over the area. The central government's reluctance to renew the *zona de despeje* inspired FARC to escalate its campaign with more than 120 attacks against the nation's cities and infrastructure.¹⁶ FARC's power and influence peaked at this point, with an estimated membership of 20,000. Álvaro Uribe, who succeeded Pastrana as President, took a very different line with the FARC. Elected on a promise to pursue FARC aggressively, he formulated a comprehensive anti-insurgent and anti-narcotics program known as "Plan Colombia." United States financial support to the Colombian military and police was integral to the program. To suppress FARC Uribe professionalized the army and also worked with the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC) paramilitary movement, which enjoyed close links with the military. By 2013 the number of FARC combatants had been reduced to an estimated 7000 and its territorial control had shrunk.

Peace talks began on 27 August 2012 under the Presidency of Juan Manuel Santos. The two sides reached agreement on land reform, compensation, and political participation in the constituent assembly.¹⁷ Finally, on November 24, 2016 the parties signed a revised peace deal.¹⁸ As of the June 25, 2017, FARC ceased its armed campaign, disarming and demobilizing under United Nations monitoring.

This section has highlighted FARC's political development, and has shown how its base-line policies aimed at agrarian reform remained consistent throughout its four decade long insurgency. A permanent peace-deal was not secured until a land-reform compensation deal had

been signed, demonstrating how FARC's fundamental objective, and the basis for much of its support, continued to be at the forefront of its struggle throughout the conflict.

FARC and Narcotics

Narcotics were central to the funding of FARC's operations, particularly in latter half the Colombian Civil War.¹⁹ An examination of this aspect of FARC's campaign is necessary to illustrate why narcotics-related violence against civilians should be understood separately from the violence more directly related to the movement's political goals. This section, therefore, explores FARC's relationship with the drugs trade, assesses how the movement adapted to the illicit industry, and how it reconciled its political ideology with what became one of its largest sources of revenue.

Coca production has been popular in Colombia since the 1950s. Farmers who had been driven to the inhospitable jungle areas around the Amazon found the crop easy to grow and extremely profitable. During the 1980s, coca production grew steadily as Colombia's foremost agricultural money-maker, coffee, correspondingly declined in profitability.²⁰ Increasing numbers of *campesinos* were drawn to its cultivation by high external demand and the relatively permissive growing conditions fostered by the state's lack of presence in many rural areas.

FARC's interest in coca was driven by three key factors. First, as the harvesting of coca became more lucrative, the peasantry under FARC's control shifted into its production thus displacing those crops that once had formed FARC's subsistence economy. Simply, FARC was obliged to acknowledge this shift to illicit agriculture. Second, the greater profitability of the crop led to the industrial up-scaling of coca by the cartels and drug-traffickers. In response, the Colombian government sought to combat coca production through a blanket policy of crop eradication, which targeted both the industrial drug-traffickers and the *campesinos*. The drug-traffickers themselves, eager to exploit rural dwellers and seize their profits, also attacked the peasant coca growers. Increasingly, FARC clashed with both the security forces and narco-

traffickers, as the traffickers looked to expand and the government looked to eradicate. Third, FARC itself was determined to extract income from the drugs trade. Aware of the potential income from coca, FARC signaled its intent to become involved in the trade at the Seventh Guerrilla Conference in 1982.²¹ Gutierrez-Sanin uses the phrase “coexist” to describe FARC’s relationship with the coca industry.²² This is perhaps an understatement of the active role FARC took in the coca economy. FARC attempted to reconcile its involvement in drugs with its political ideology. Felbab-Brown argued that by regularizing production and challenging eradication policies, rebels stood to gain popular support.²³ In Colombia this was certainly observable. FARC commander, Yazid Arteta, for example, claimed that the movement urged the *campesinos* to set aside a portion of their land for raising food as well as coca, while also protecting the peasant economy by battling the landowners and what they had labeled the “narco-bourgeoisie.”²⁴

The targeting of coca paste farmers in neighboring countries also fueled the narco-boom as cultivation was progressively transplanted to Colombia. By 1997, Colombia surpassed Peru and Bolivia as major coca suppliers. In 2009 Saab and Taylor reported that Colombia had become the single largest exporter of cocaine in the world (providing 80 per cent of the world’s supply).²⁵ Obviously, FARC was not solely responsible for this but it underlined the size of the market in which it had become a key player. Revenues from narcotics along with other income-generation enabled FARC, according to Ortiz, to become wholly self-financing.²⁶ There has been debate about the proportion of FARC’s income from drugs. Some studies put it at 50 per cent (in 2000)²⁷ whereas Alexandra Guáqueta placed it between 60 and 90 per cent.²⁸ Regardless of the exact percentages, it is clear that narcotics were a primary source of revenue for FARC. According to Vargas:

The coca economy reinforced the disconnection between the population and the Colombian state as coca pickers and cultivators were pushed into illegality and

sometimes banned by the insurgency from taking part in state-funded welfare programmes. By the same token, it allowed the insurgents to establish themselves as regulators of the coca paste market, policing transactions between producers and buyers from different “cartels” and playing a role that, for obvious reasons, the Colombian state could not perform.²⁹

To a degree FARC sought to align its involvement in narcotics with its political ideals. Unlike the cartels or paramilitaries, it did not establish a vertical presence in the drugs trade, that is to say, involving itself at all levels in the trafficking chain: cultivation, production, and distribution.³⁰ Instead, FARC generated profits from protection fees and from a tax called the *gramaje*. The *gramaje* was a system of taxes imposed on the different links of the narco-supply chain in FARC’s areas of control.³¹ Usually, the tax was a percentage of the value of the drugs produced and exported. Steinitz determined that the FARC had standardized fees in 1999: \$15.70 p/kg of coca paste, \$52.60 p/kg of cocaine produced in territory, \$10.50 p/kg of coca and \$45 p/kg of heroine shipped through its territory.³² In this respect, FARC maintained a horizontal presence in the drug trade. Whilst FARC provided protection to the coca farmers, it did not maintain an international narco-trafficking presence. It preferred, instead, to use small and medium-sized criminal organizations to traffic and distribute the coca from its territory,³³ with one 2005 report suggesting that while 65 of FARC’s 110 front groups and other operational units were involved in some aspect of the drugs trade, the trafficking itself was predominantly controlled by organized criminal groups.³⁴

FARC justified its participation in the drugs trafficking business as a form of peasant solidarity. Simon Trinidad of FARC argued that the narcotics industry was a product of the Colombian state’s abandonment of the *campesinos*, which “obliged” farmers “to cultivate illicit crops because of a government that has neglected them for many years... we will not leave them without jobs.”³⁵ Of course, skepticism can be applied to such apparent benevolence. Mid-level

FARC commanders were incriminated in trafficking as well as cultivation, while the decentralized nature of FARC's command structure meant that the Secretariat could maintain deniability.³⁶ Even so, FARC evidently understood both the economic and political gains (in terms of peasant support) from its involvement in narcotics. Indeed, in the richest coca-producing regions, FARC secured a stable economic foundation for peasants by regulating market relations and prices.³⁷

It was through the narcotics industry that FARC came into conflict with the drugs cartels and by extension, the state backed paramilitaries. As the narco-economy flourished, the cartels extended their influence into remote rural areas, often by purchasing land from cattle ranchers. These ranches also provided an avenue for money-laundering and so by the late 1980s, the cartels and new landowners possessed about a third of the most fertile grazing land in the country.³⁸ The expanding power of the cartels inevitably created friction with FARC. Initially, the narco-traffickers tried to reach accommodations with FARC. Viewing the cartels as exploitative gangsters, FARC rejected these overtures.³⁹ As FARC pressed into regions like Montes de Maria, in the northern part of the country, it began to kidnap drug traffickers and *latifundistas* (landowners). In response, these parties formed the *Muerto as los Secuesteros* (Death to Kidnappers), a self-defense force, protecting the narco-traffickers, landowners, and state/military officials who all had financial interests in the drugs trade. Working closely with the military it developed into what became the paramilitary forces of the AUC.

The AUC was formed with the backing of the armed forces, and received significant government support particularly during the Uribe administration. By 2000, it was claimed to have as many as 11,200 fighters. The paramilitaries have allegedly killed more than twice as many civilians as the insurgents, often by perpetrating village massacres.⁴⁰ The AUC was formally disbanded in 2006, and those paramilitary forces still involved with narcotics became known as *Bandas Criminales* (BACRIM).

The AUC remnants of BACRIM and FARC continued their violence. This sub-conflict within the greater civil war was not just a conflict over coca plantations. It also emphasized the conflicting ideologies in play. The *campesinos* preferred the authority of the FARC to that of the army or paramilitaries because the guerrillas only taxed the farmers once for conducting their trade, whereas the army imposed several taxes (for which read, bribes) but also threatened arson if cooperation was not forthcoming.⁴¹

FARC, for the most part, managed the coca economy within the scope of its political ideals. Arguably, the AUC did the same. The AUC represented the *hacendados* and *latifundistas*, the large-scale landowners who were the embodiment of the corruption and socio-economic disparity with which FARC's agrarian-minded, left-wing ideology necessarily clashed. In that sense, FARC's involvement with narcotics was an inevitable consequence of the socio-political conditions in Colombia, framing the conflict with the paramilitaries in ideological terms, and becoming a central feature of its struggle during the civil war.

Understanding FARC's relationship with the narcotics industry illuminates the complex inter-dependency of politics and drugs in FARC's strategy. This inter-dependency also highlights why micro-level studies of violence against civilians are unable to satisfactorily explain the conflict. In particular, through an examination of the AUC/BRICAM set-up, it shall be shown that the distinction between a civilian and military combatant was often blurred, thus affecting the hypotheses of the micro-level studies.

Further, while FARC was implicated in the illicit drugs trade, its involvement, nevertheless, continued to reflect its political outlook. FARC operated a parallel state structure and this had important political consequences,⁴² securing a social base and assuring the movement of a substantial level of support.⁴³ In turn, this defined how the government and military perceived FARC. The interdependency of FARC's political goals with narcotics does not mean that all distinctions between "political" violence and money-driven violence are misconceived,⁴⁴ rather that violence against civilians often needs to be carefully disaggregated in

order to distinguish where it was being employed in relation to narcotics and where it was an extension of politics.

The Inadequacies of Universalistic Explanations of Violence Against Civilians

Zones, Defections and Denunciations

Understanding the complexity of FARC's evolution and its relationship to the narcotics industry begins to illuminate why universalistic micro-level studies of violence against civilians are unsatisfactory. This section will explore a number of important studies of violence in civil wars, and while not denying the merits of their scholarship it will suggest that by positioning themselves as universalistic they create weaknesses in their hypotheses.

Stathis Kalyvas's, *The Logic of Violence*, is one of the first and most extensive micro-level studies of violence against civilians. Because of its focus on rational actor/selective violence it is regarded as a seminal text. The influence of this work can be seen in the writings of others such as those of Metelits, Vargas, Wood, and Hoover-Green. However, the model presented in *The Logic of Violence* is problematic when applied to FARC's application of violence against civilians in the Colombian Civil War.

Kalyvas' model of selective violence is based on three distinct but related processes: the individual calculus of defection; the individual calculus of denunciation; and the organizational calculus of violence. He argues that a political actor's preferences in conditions of civil war are straightforward, which seek to maximize territory and control. To increase control, the actor must obtain the exclusive collaboration of civilians and eliminate defection (collaboration with rival actor), "and that is the main function of selective violence."⁴⁵ He states that there is "no anarchy" when one rival actor leaves, another rival actor moves in. The shifts in control are a product of two factors: exogenous military resources that allow an actor to conquer, and the use of selective violence in territory that is already conquered. Civilians thus consider the "calculus of defection" and the "calculus of denunciation." Both will be affected by the individual perception

of territorial control. If they believe that defection will benefit them then they will enact that decision. If they believe that denouncing a neighbor will provide rewards, then they will do that. In short, “civilians must make two separate strategic decisions: whether to defect and whether to denounce... political actors must decide whether to use violence and what kind to employ.”⁴⁶

To illustrate, he distributes the conflict space into five zones of control. Z1 is total incumbent control, and Z5 is total insurgent control. Zones 2, 3, and 4, are contested areas. Incumbents primarily control Z2, while the insurgents primarily control Z4, and both control Z3 equally. These zones also affect defection levels. Only “martyrs” would defect in Z1 and Z2. Highly committed individuals defect in Z2 and Z4. Z3 sees the highest levels of defection. The benefits of using violence within these zones, he argues, are the consolidation of control through eliminating defectors and the deterrence of potential defectors. Actors will use violence when the benefits are greater than the costs. Defection is unlikely in Z1 and Z5 and therefore denunciations are most likely false. Therefore, selective violence is unlikely to be observed in those zones. Selective violence is also unlikely to be observed in Z3 because there is an absence of denunciations and counter-denunciations. In Z1 and Z5 there is likely to be indiscriminate violence exercised by the rival actor. In contested Z2 and Z4 actors will have both an incentive and the ability to use selective violence. In Z3 the incentive to use violence will be high but the costs would likely outweigh the benefits as the use of indiscriminate violence in that zone could result in mass defections.⁴⁷

This theory produces some interesting extrapolations. In particular, the area with the highest level of contestation (Z3) is predicted to be an “oasis of peace” amidst the violence. It will also have the high levels of defections with low levels of denunciations. Kalyvas states that this absence of violence has two implications. First, it suggests that the proverbial “front line” in civil war is likely to be the least violent place for civilians. Second, selective violence occurs only where the incentives of local and supralocal actors converge. No violence will occur where political actors alone want it most or where local actors alone are willing to provide the

information necessary.⁴⁸ In short, Kalyvas' theory of selective violence is a joint process. It relies on the convergence of decision making by both the political actors and civilians with the key resources being information and violence. From a broad social science standpoint, the theory is impressive: the combination of a game theoretical approach with comparative evidence makes it persuasive. But does it apply to Colombia?

The first major criticism of Kalyvas is that his "control-collaboration" model captures only those conflicts with two clear political adversaries. Throughout the theory, he refers to these two actors as incumbent and insurgents. Repeatedly he uses the examples of the Vietnamese Civil War and the American Civil War in which the conflicts did have two distinct political contenders. For his main empirical case study, he examines the Greek Civil War, which was fought between the government and the forces of the Greek Communist Party. Whilst each of these civil wars had complex dynamics, they still possessed two clear sides: an incumbent government challenged by rebel forces. This paradigm does not however apply to the Colombian Civil War where there were multiple actors at play, as elucidated above. Furthermore, the Greek Civil War occurred in an entirely different global-political context to Colombia. Therefore to treat diverse instances of civil conflict as comparable over-extends the theory. Kalyvas seeks to justify the universal relevance of his theory by stating that "war entails a reductionist logic," by maintaining that "rarely are all actors in a multi-actor conflict simultaneously active in every locality of a country and where they are, alliances tend to produce bipolar conflict."⁴⁹ It might indeed be rare for all actors to be simultaneously active in "every locality of a conflict." That does not mean, however, that all instances of civil war are reducible to a binary conflict. The Colombian Civil War is not unique in being characterized by the presence of multiple actors, with manifold agendas across numerous locations. This highlights a problem with such universalistic studies in general in that they must reduce all conflicts to a lateral theoretical plane to apply their hypothesis.

Kaplan's study of the *Asociación de Trabajadores Campesinos del Carare* (Peasant Worker Association of the Carare River) (ATCC) underlines how Kalyvas' hypothesis is inadequate for explaining the Colombian case.⁵⁰ The association was created following a decade long conflict between FARC and another rebel group, the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* – ELN (National Liberation Army). The association came to an agreement with both organizations that civilians would neither leave the area, nor take part in the conflict. Thus, between 1987 and 2000 there was virtually no conflict-related violence in this region.⁵¹ Kaplan questions whether the ATCC confirms Kalyvas' hypothesis.⁵² By using Kalyvas' model to explore the shifts in control, he finds that if the theory was correct, then the ATCC could only have survived under contested or complete control, and that denunciations, threats and violence all should have ceased.

It is therefore not congruent with Kalyvas' hypothesis that denunciations and threats continued to occur, but did not lead to the killings of civilians.⁵³ Kaplan's study illustrates that Kalyvas's binary actor model covers over complexity and limits understandings of conflicts such as those in Colombia, which saw a multitude of actors appearing at different times over a 40-year period. For example, the activities of actors like the drug cartels affected the nature of FARC's violence against civilians in conditions where, contra Kalyvas, the violence was often not about territorial control but commercial gain. Indeed, given how narcotics became a defining element within FARC's campaign this points to the wider shortcoming in the Kalyvas model in that it ignores how violence against civilians is affected by the struggle for the control of resources, not just territory. Again many examples of civil war are thereby excluded.⁵⁴

The final criticism of Kalyvas lies with the caveats he places on his argument. He first acknowledges that his theory has simplified conflict. He discusses, for example, how his assumption about denunciations might be incorrect: "there is evidence from psychological experiments that people are not good at assessing risk in general", he argues.⁵⁵ He avers also that in a conflict environment a civilian's concept of time is skewed, suggesting that they are only able to make judgements on the immediate situation. They might be unable to see more than a few

weeks ahead. They might overestimate their own security or have misplaced faith in the promises of the political actors to offer stability.⁵⁶ He argues that his theory is a sensible simplification, a theoretical baseline, and that “the identification of its empirical failures is particularly productive.”⁵⁷ These self-deprecating caveats are worthy but ultimately they demonstrate that Kalyvas’s insights have limited applicability beyond the specific case studies he uses to validate his theories.

In a 2012 article Kalyvas discussed how his control-collaboration model could be extended to other conflicts. He acknowledges criticisms from Vargas,⁵⁸ who after testing Kalyvas’ model on a Colombian city found that paramilitaries were able to use selective violence even in areas of little control. He also acknowledges the validity of other alternative approaches, such as those of Metelits and Weinstein (to be discussed below).⁵⁹ However, he again epilogues these critical acknowledgements by stating that “rather than seeking to produce a new theory per paper (or book)”⁶⁰ that analysts should use his baseline control-collaboration model. Kalyvas may have wanted the sentiment to appear altruistic. Instead, it presents itself as a “get-out” clause, a form of academic hedging, and that is an unsatisfactory way of trying to universalize a theory.

Extractive and Coercive Behaviors

Claire Metelits provides the only universalistic theory that uses FARC as a case study. She employs slightly different terminology to Kalyvas, seeing the treatment of civilians ranging along a spectrum from coercive (also referred to as violent) to contractual behavior. Unlike Kalyvas, she defines coercive behavior as a range of violent deeds encompassing the “forcible extraction of resources from civilians, kidnapping, burning villages, raping and looting, intentional withholding of humanitarian aid.”⁶¹ This understanding displays a more nuanced understanding

of insurgent interactions with civilians than allowed for by Kalyvas, who solely focuses on homicides.

Metelits's theory argues that insurgents shape their strategies toward local communities based on whether they face competition, or "active rivalry." Active rivals rely on the same pool of resources as the insurgents, and this leads to competition. If an incumbent political actor possesses the capacity for the exclusive extraction of resources with relatively little threat from other armed organizations, it will be likely to seek mutually beneficial ties with local populations. Once a threat appears from a rival group or even in the prospect of state reform, however, it is more likely to protect its perceived interests through means that can harm locals.⁶² She contends that the objective for insurgent groups is extractive opportunity. This is because there is no guaranteed long-term economic foundation for these organizations. The supply of resources is likely to be tenuous and therefore insurgent groups will desire as much opportunity as possible to exploit the resident resource base. The only way to do this is to control the extractive processes within their areas of operation.⁶³

Metelits analyses three case studies to support her argument: the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA); FARC; and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK). She refers to these groups as "insurgents," which she defines as non-state armed actors that use violence to reformulate or destroy the foundation of politics in an existing country.⁶⁴

In her examination of FARC, which she entitles "From Jekyll to Hyde," she describes how the movement began as a "mediating force in rural Colombia" that maximized its legitimacy by providing services for peasants. Even by the end of the 1980s when it commenced involvement in the narcotics industry, FARC, she maintained, continued to have a contractual relationship with local communities. Nevertheless, by the late 1990s, FARC had become "extremely violent in its treatment of the rural population it had previously protected,"⁶⁵ arising out of the appearance of active rivals who competed for resources. Her argument thus rests on the resource-violence nexus, which, as will be discussed, is presented as a universalistic

explanation that ultimately causes her theory to exaggerate the importance of a number of factors while missing certain nuances.

Empirically, Metelits's theory is based on rigorous evidence. If we evaluate her claims for the change from contractual to coercive behavior in 1998 against Restrepo et al's dataset we can discern that her observations are broadly true.⁶⁶ Restrepo et al describe the move towards coercion as an "upsurge" and ascribe it to the rise of the paramilitary groups. This would seem to confirm Metelits's theory that the presence of an active rival in its territory caused FARC to become more violent towards civilians because its "thinking shifted to short term-military objectives and survival became uncertain."⁶⁷ A problem resides, though, in Metelits's causal mechanism. She attributes the rise in violence to the presence of the paramilitaries. Yet, as we have shown, FARC was at its strongest in the period from 1996 to 2002, in terms of numbers of personnel, territorial control, and income generation (from narcotics, kidnappings and extortion). The rise in violence against civilians cannot, therefore, be accredited solely to the presence of a unified front of paramilitaries as an "active rival." FARC was at war. It was strategically logical that it would escalate its violence during a point at which it was in the ascendant. FARC enjoyed its best chance to assert its political vision and, since war is an extension of politics, it follows that its violence intensified.

The principal shortcoming in Metelits's argument, however, is that her theory discounts the role of agency. This is somewhat surprising because she states at the beginning of her book that "too frequently non-state armed actors are misunderstood as being acted upon."⁶⁸ Yet she also argues that "for insurgents, violence against other armed forces serves a purpose: it is one of the primary political tools they use to reshape the foundation of politics in a state."⁶⁹ This quotation demonstrates an understanding that FARC's violence was politically instrumental. However, she omits civilians from this statement. For Metelits, violence against civilians is purely reactionary: a tactic used when FARC was on the military defensive or when its resources were being challenged. This is incorrect. FARC kidnapped and extorted steadily throughout its

campaign. We have already discussed just how important kidnappings and extortion were as a source of revenue. Nearly half of FARC's kidnapping victims were from the public administration and defense sectors, like government workers in well-paid jobs who were likely to pay ransom demands.⁷⁰

For all Metelits's contentions, her theory fails to discern that coercive behaviors do not always stem from a reaction to competition. Her evidence is subordinated to support the notion of "active rivalry." FARC demonstrated consistently throughout its insurgency that violence against civilians was always a tool. It was at war with the state. It had to fund itself through violent and illicit means. Metelits paints the picture of FARC as a force the identity of which changed because of resource conflict and the entrance of active rivals because it fits her theoretical narrative. As with Kalyvas, she looks for patterns in other conflicts to confirm her hypothesis but in doing so disregards evidence that falsifies her argument. FARC's aims were clear, to establish its own system of governance through defeating the Colombian government and to continue to generate revenue through the illicit narcotics trade. Violence against civilians was simply a means towards those ends.

Activists and Opportunists

Finally, we shall consider the work of Jeremy Weinstein. Like Metelits, he perceives that resource competition is the primary determinant of conflict. In this respect, he is clearly influenced by works like that of Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler's, *Greed and Grievance in Civil War*.⁷¹ His central finding is that rebel groups that emerge in resource-rich environments or with the external support of an outside patron tend to commit high levels of indiscriminate violence. In contrast, movements that arise in resource-poor contexts perpetrate far fewer abuses and employ violence selectively and strategically.⁷² Weinstein follows a similar definition of violence to Metelits, stating that it "refers both to the character of the insurgent actors (the extent to which groups use force selectively to punish and prevent defection) and its aggregate level (the number of

killings, abductions, rapes and so on).⁷³ Again, this is a more capacious definition of violence than Kalyvas's theory allows.

Weinstein hypothesizes that the profile of an organization's membership will affect the type of violence employed against civilians. Ready access to raw materials means that violence can be easily enacted without civilian consent. This factor also shapes the individuals who participate. He identifies two distinct forms of rebellion: 1) "Activist" rebellions, where participation is risky and short-term gains are unlikely. Here, rebel groups tend to attract only the most committed investors; 2) "Opportunistic" rebellions, where participation involves fewer risks and individuals can expect to be rewarded immediately for their involvement. These groups tend to attract consumers. The membership profile thus affects internal organization and the strategies pursued in war. Activist rebellions, for example, must extract the resources they need from civilians without destroying their base of support and sustenance.⁷⁴ Furthermore, groups that do commit high levels of indiscriminate violence do so not because of ethnic hatred or for strategic benefits but because group leaders are less able to discipline the use of force in situations where membership of an armed organization is determined by the "endowments" (resources) available that can be gained through war.⁷⁵

Weinstein also differentiates between two categories of endowments. First, economic endowments: this refers to resources that can be mobilized to finance the start-up and maintenance of a rebel organization, such as gold, diamonds, oil and narcotics. Second, social endowments: this refers to "distinctive identities and dense inter-personal networks that can be readily mobilized in support of collective action."⁷⁶ Endowments are important as they contour and constrain the range of strategies leaders can employ. Economic endowments will attract opportunists (consumers) whereas social endowments will attract committed activists (investors). Weinstein accepts that no group only uses economic or social endowments but his theory is that more of one endowment affects organizational membership and the application of violence.⁷⁷

Weinstein employs four case studies to elucidate his theory: the National Resistance

Army (NRA) in Uganda, the Mozambican National Resistance (RENAMO), the *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) in Peru and an off-shoot of the Sendero, the *Comité Regional del Alto Huallaga* (Regional Committee of the Upper Huallaga Valley). He argues that the NRA was victorious after a six-year campaign characterized by “tremendous political mobilisation, the refashioning of democratic governing structures during the conflict and an uncharacteristic restraint in the use of violence.”⁷⁸ In Mozambique, RENAMO were known for high levels of indiscipline and indiscriminate violence. In Peru, the Regional Committee of the Upper Huallaga Valley abandoned ideological investment in favor of involvement in the drugs trade, while the broader Sendero movement maintained the “carefully orchestrated the use of revolutionary violence to accomplish its political objectives.”⁷⁹ The reason these groups (although similar in their opposition, objective and context) differed in their use of violence lay in their access to resources. The NRA had a “committed and culturally homogenous core” but lacked economic resources.⁸⁰ In contrast, RENAMO had the full backing of the Rhodesian regime and then the apartheid government in South Africa. The *Sendero* lacked economic resources and therefore relied heavily on local support, whereas in the Upper Huallaga Valley *Sendero* elements became involved in the coca trade and their ideological commitment eroded.

Weinstein justifies his case study selections by claiming that the rebel organizations all faced a reasonably strong state apparatus, that they emerged at times of political transition, and that all had the primary objective of overthrowing the government, controlling the central state, and its resources. However, these factors account for the causes of any number of civil wars.⁸¹ There is nothing peculiar about the reasons for these emerging movements. All rebellions arise from a desire to overthrow the central state or at least the authority in the rebellious region. They all take advantage of an authority gap when the central regime is weak.⁸² These case studies were chosen, it may be suggested, largely because they confirm the hypothesis, a recurring theme in these universalistic studies. Weinstein, it can be argued, has – entirely plausibly – discerned a

pattern, developed a theory, extrapolated it to other conflicts, and sought evidence that confirms the thesis.

Weinstein's argument is predicated on the initial recruitment interaction between the leaders and the members of an organization. Kalyvas questions this by saying that Weinstein misses two critical dimensions: interactions between rebels and civilians, and between rebels and state forces.⁸³ Civilians are not completely useless to rebels: they can be co-opted into self-defense militias and resist state backed forces, a phenomenon observable in Colombia and Peru.⁸⁴ Kalyvas also notes that Weinstein's argument ought to apply in reverse, to state behavior. In that sense Weinstein's theory implies that if modern professional militaries attract individuals into their ranks due to the resource benefits to be gained, via salaries and other benefits for instance, they too would be prone to mass indiscipline and abuse of civilians. The criticism is perhaps unfair on Weinstein given that he specifically caveats that he is discussing only rebel organizations. However, he overlooks the fact that violence in civil wars is invariably applied strategically to gain certain objectives against the state, which itself is attempting to resist the extension of rebel influence. Armed groups must therefore adapt to changing realities if they are to survive. Kalyvas contends that the neglect of the shifting state actor/non-state actor relationship clashes with "the book's unflinching commitment to the most stringent version of path dependency,"⁸⁵ because it assumes that only initial endowments matter, and once an armed group attracts a specific type of individual, it is unable to change.

In discussing FARC Weinstein maintains that "resilience" is one of the main challenges faced by rebel organizations. He argues that FARC was compelled to accept the shift to illicit crop plantation because that was the only way it could maintain its legitimacy and authority among the communities in which it was strongest. He continues by saying that FARC reluctantly assumed the task of policing criminal and delinquent activity, and then had to implement the *gramaje* system to pay for these services. Applying his theory, he claims that it was endowment shocks that weakened the political basis of FARC. It was the growing pervasiveness of narcotics

as a resource that drew “consumers” into the fray, thus eroding FARC’s political ideals and increasing its violence against civilians.⁸⁶ However, as this analysis has pointed out, FARC’s decision to engage with the narcotics industry is not as clear-cut as Weinstein thesis implies, ignoring as it does the role of the state and the paramilitaries in explaining the upsurge in violence against civilians. Again, this interpretation of FARC’s transformation, like Metelits, removes FARC’s own agency and strategic decision-making.

A further criticism concerns Weinstein’s causal mechanism. The argument that resource-wealthy organizations will attract undisciplined “consumers” who extract resources through coercion is, according to Kalyvas, “far from watertight.”⁸⁷ A materialist individual might still become involved with a highly disciplined armed organization. Kalyvas questions why the extraction of resources requires coercion rather than side-payments or why an armed group with external patrons (like RENAMO) would need to resort to violence at all if it could afford to forgo the extraction of resources from civilians.⁸⁸ Resource-poor insurgencies, Kalyvas suggests, do not have to rely on “social endowments.” They can forcibly recruit and abduct (like the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda), while even wealthy armed groups forcibly recruit anyway (such as Revolutionary United Front in Sierra Leone). Furthermore, as Gutierrez-Sanin observes, highly motivated ideological groups are often more likely to engage in genocidal behaviors, one of the most extreme forms of violence against civilians.⁸⁹

Finally, the example of FARC was always liable to be an outlier for Weinstein’s theory. FARC was known for being a disciplined organization with stringent rules. FARC did not pay its members.⁹⁰ Yet, for the better part of three decades it could be described as a resource-rich movement. Arjona and Kalyvas also claim that at the recruitment phase only 23 per cent of FARC combatants were attracted by the promise of money or goods.⁹¹ While Weinstein declares that non-state armed groups can have both social and economic endowments, FARC engaged in a range of violent behaviors throughout the conflict: behaviors that largely reflected its political aims, such as sabotaging local elections with threats to civilians⁹² or firing mortars at the crowds

during Uribe's presidential inauguration.⁹³ Such actions were conducted at a time when both FARC's membership and its resource revenue were at their highest.

The Inadequacy of Universalistic Explanations

The section above articulated how some key theories of rebel group behavior have difficulty in accounting for FARC. Collectively, they illustrate how attempts to derive universal understandings from complex, contingent circumstances, result in extrapolations that are disputable. These studies, for example, invariably remove civilian preferences and choices from the equation and assert mechanistic understandings of armed group behaviors. In fact, it mattered little whether FARC was partly dominant in a territory, faced active competition, or recruited opportunists, the likelihood was simply that if FARC encountered areas that were resistant to its political ideology then the likelihood was that violence against the community would occur. It is debatable whether any of these micro-level theories add anything of greater value to this basic reality.

Another recurring problem is that these studies assume that insurgencies constitute "irregular war" or "asymmetric conflict," without really questioning whether such terms contain any inherent meaning. This assumption affects how these theories view the practice of violence against civilians: often perceiving it as an involuntary side effect of war because the non-state group resorts to guerrilla tactics, which predisposes itself – supposedly – towards the coercion of the civilian population. The distinction between a "regular" and "irregular" war is a false one. Wars are never binary conflicts between equally matched opponents. All war is asymmetrical. Moreover, to proclaim that irregular wars are merely those characterized by the presence of non-state actors or the use of guerrilla tactics is equally arbitrary since these factors can, and have been, present in many instances of war.⁹⁴ Describing the Colombian civil war as "irregular" in nature and presenting FARC's violence against civilians as an unfortunate by-product of the conflict is thus a mischaracterization. The use of violence against civilians can arise from

proactive decisions, and in the case of FARC be interpreted as a logical extension of its politics through violence or to further its narcotics-related endeavors.

As this study will disclose, the thinking of Carl von Clausewitz is useful and relevant to understand the notion of violence against civilians. He is notably absent from the works discussed above. Apart from a brief mention in Kalyvas,⁹⁵ they do not address any of Clausewitz's ideas. Given Clausewitz pre-eminence as a theorist of war, such an omission is surprising, even inexplicable. Do they not believe Clausewitz can be relevant in the modern age? Or perhaps they realize that the application of his theory refutes much of what they argue?

Kalyvas does not properly contend with Clausewitz, though he does end up replicating certain Clausewitzian arguments in different form. For example, Kalyvas states that once control is achieved, violence becomes redundant, that the higher an actor's level of control, the less likely the actor will use violence.⁹⁶ Clausewitz reasons that the aims of a war are to disarm your enemy and to assert political will through violence: "As long as the enemy is not defeated, he may defeat me; then I shall be no longer my own master; he will dictate the law to me as I did to him."⁹⁷ The defeat of the enemy constitutes dominant control for Kalyvas. Therefore, with dominant control, violence becomes redundant. In zones of partial control, the enemy is not defeated, and violence must continue. Metelits also contains some Clausewitzian overtones. She states: "For insurgents, violence against other armed forces serves a purpose: it is one of the primary political tools they use to reshape the foundation of politics in a state."⁹⁸ This statement is coherent in Clausewitzian terms but she overlooks the fact that violence committed against civilians can also be a political tool. As shall be discussed, all violence is purposive including that perpetrated against civilians.

To summarize, these universalistic studies have all presented explanations for understanding violence against civilians, and measured against the case studies chosen, their hypotheses are confirmed. Inadequacies arise, though, in a desire to generalize these explanations across time and space to all civil wars. In doing so, they are unable to make specific exceptions about any conflict because that begins a process of exclusion and thus undermines the aspiration

to universal applicability. At the very least such theoretical inadequacy suggests the need for an alternative framework to understand violence committed against civilians by FARC in the Colombian Civil war.

The following alternative framework is outlined because it bridges the resource versus political divide that weakens these universalistic explanations. As this analysis has maintained, FARC's violence cannot be assigned to one or another. Narcotics aided its struggle but became so integral to its identity that it clearly influenced its violence against civilians. FARC's political aims remained constant, as evidenced by its continued attacks against state infrastructure and kidnappings of public sector workers. That there was an ebb and flow to the civil war is undeniable. It is an inescapable feature of most wars and is fully accounted for by Clausewitz's observation that, war is unpredictable, "composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force: of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam: and of its element of subordination as a political instrument."⁹⁹ FARC was both proactive and reactive. The movement exploited a large repertoire of violence, which peaked and troughed throughout the conflict. No single explanation will truly be adequate and that is why these universalistic studies remain unsatisfactory.

Clausewitz and FARC

"The alleged obsolescence of Clausewitz in the early twenty-first Century," according to Daase and Davis, "is attributed to a time-bound framework of analysis and a failure to anticipate forms of warfare beyond the rather symmetric pitched battlefield exchanges of large regular armies."¹⁰⁰

This statement emphasizes one of the challenges in establishing Clausewitz's relevance to modern civil war. Contemporary scholars often claim that Clausewitz is outmoded and that his thinking only applies to big battles, which have rarely been witnessed in modern warfare since the end of World War II.¹⁰¹ This, however, is to fundamentally misread Clausewitz. The task of

this section is to demonstrate the enduring relevance of Clausewitz to modern civil wars – that is wars fought within the confines of a nation-state – and, in particular, to show how his theorizations are useful for understanding FARC’s violence against civilians.

Commentators have noted that terms such as irregular war, insurgency, unconventional war and guerrilla war are encumbered by definitional ambiguity.¹⁰² In particular, they observe that notion of asymmetric war is a truism. In practice all wars are asymmetrical. In fact, they are all unique and non-reproducible in form.¹⁰³ For Clausewitz this establishes a central insight: “Wars must vary with the nature of their motives and of the situations that give rise to them.”¹⁰⁴ It is most unlikely that Clausewitz would have sympathized with the continuous attempts of modern political science to separate war into typologies. As Harry Summers, a modern interpreter of Clausewitz, declared: “a war is a war is a war is a war is a war.”¹⁰⁵ This comment was intended to reinforce Clausewitz’s argument that war is, regardless of context, “*an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.*”¹⁰⁶ Clausewitz is, in this respect, enunciating the lasting essence of war. The outer form of war always changes in each specific context owing to variations in relationships between popular passions, the play of chance and probability, and the influence of politics, along with a host of tangible and intangible factors, ranging from terrain, socio-political history, the quality of those doing the fighting, the character of political authority and so on. Yet, despite the infinite variations, war nevertheless possesses an “enduring constitution:”¹⁰⁷ the use of violence to attain political objectives. Clausewitz deploys the metaphor of a chameleon to illustrate the point that the essential biology of war remains constant but its appearance changes in different circumstances. Clausewitz writes:

War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative

spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.¹⁰⁸

The chameleon-like nature of war, and the constant fluctuating interactions of passion, chance and reason within the permanence of the “paradoxical trinity,” relates well to the example of FARC and the Colombian Civil War. The “blind instinct” of popular passion is clearly apparent in the original historic animosity left over from *La Violencia* and the perceived injustices perpetrated by the *hacendados* and Colombian government. The play of probability and chance reflects the endless variables that ineluctably manifest themselves during a four-decade rebellion. The subordination of violence to the political instrument is discernible in the manner in which FARC sought to harness the social and material forces at its disposal to achieve its objectives.

As this study has already revealed, FARC’s political aims did change during the conflict. Yet Clausewitz accounts for this: “The political object is no despotic lawgiver... it must accommodate itself to the nature of the means.”¹⁰⁹ FARC was often constrained in its ability to apply force against its government and state backed adversaries. FARC was aware of its limitations and its political aims changed over time. After the failure of the *Union Patriótica*, for example, FARC came to believe that seeking political influence within established constitutional structures was unlikely to be successful. Similarly, following the granting of the *zona de despeje*, FARC began to see an extension of that *zona* as a key military objective.

Critics of Clausewitz’s contemporary relevance almost always overlook that he discoursed many times on insurgent/rebel conduct and small-unit warfare in earlier works. In *Bekenntnisschrift* (Testimonial), *Volksbewaffnung* (Arming of the people), “Lectures on Small War” and “On the Political Advantages and Disadvantages of the Prussian Institutions of the *Landwehr*” Clausewitz discussed many points that might be said to resonate with more modern ideas of insurgency. In the *Bekenntnisschrift* (1812) he developed a political argument and military strategy for a popular insurrection against the French occupation of Prussia. In

Volksbewaffnung he addressed the practical as well as theoretical aspects of popular revolt and guerrilla warfare. Finally, in the “Lectures on Small War” (1810 and 1811) he analyzed small-unit warfare and considered the rebellion in the Vendée, the Tyrolean uprisings of 1809, and the Spanish insurrection in the peninsular war against Napoleonic France.¹¹⁰

In the *Bekenntnisschrift* Daase and Davis show that Clausewitz had a keen understanding of the potential of “ideologically motivated irregulars drawn from the population.”¹¹¹ “Very few people”, he observed, “have a clear understanding of the full extent of this fearsome, decisive measure, which throws the country into a state of dangerous crisis. They do not understand how individual citizens of communities united into loose bands can possess the daring courage to resist a large army.”¹¹²

Of particular note, Clausewitz discusses the *Landsturm*, a citizen militia or military force of inferior quality to the *Landwehr* (standing army). Clausewitz described the formation of the *Landsturm* as the coming together of “two to three communities,” which “create a band or a company... the bands of a county constitute a column or a *Landsturm* and the *Landsturm* of an entire province small army.”¹¹³ This structural formula, in fact, has clear similarities to FARC’s system of *frentes* and *bloques*. Furthermore, even the objectives of the *Landsturm* ring true “to prevent deliveries and contributions of all kinds... to fight enemy detachments which show up in the province... to secure the materiel that their own government wants to extract from the country.”¹¹⁴ A modern parallel in Colombia suggests itself in that FARC was noted for its use of anti-aircraft missiles against the government’s crop eradication strategies during the Plan Colombia years.¹¹⁵

Clausewitz anticipated the tactics and strategy used in these kinds of campaigns, when he declared that the “task of the individual bands is to attack weak parties and enemy posts, to take away and disperse supplies... one of the primary objectives is to seize artillery, munitions, foodstuffs.”¹¹⁶ In noting how small-unit combat units can be deployed, he stated that “they can sustain themselves quite easily almost anywhere” and that “their retreat is less difficult and can

be conducted on unpaved roads and in opposite directions.”¹¹⁷ Such attributes prefaced the advocacy of guerrilla war that Mao Tse-tung espoused in *On Guerrilla Warfare*.¹¹⁸

There are also parallels between the Tyrolean uprising and the Colombian conflict. Both were uprisings organized by peasants. Both were in response to wealthier land-owning classes imposing their rule and taxes onto private land. Here, Clausewitz understood small-unit warfare and the limitations of a peasant force versus a state’s standing army. He perceived the likely tactics that would be employed by such groups. It is a testament to the lasting relevance of his observations that these tactics remain the most effective for non-state armed groups today.

Of course, the dynamics and longevity of these conflicts differ greatly. Clausewitz’s *Landsturm* and the Tyrolean peasants did not have to contend with paramilitaries, illicit crops and international intervention. Moreover, the *Landsturm* were established by a sovereign state that had been invaded by Napoleonic France. Clausewitz himself was certainly writing at time when notions of Westphalian sovereignty and the nation-state were paramount, but none of this should detract from an appreciation of Clausewitz’s of the applicability of a great deal of his thinking to non-state actors.¹¹⁹

Establishing Clausewitz’s relevance to the Colombian conflict is important. Since Clausewitz never addressed the issue directly, critics might question how this relates to an understanding violence against civilians? Comprehending Clausewitz’s thinking allows us to see the purpose behind the means, namely, the extension of politics through violence. FARC attacked civilians because it serviced its goals. For instance, the data on kidnappings provided by the National Center for Historical Memory indicates that 51 per cent of FARC’s victims were from the public administration and defense sector, 39 per cent from the agricultural sector, and 33 per cent from the commercial sector.¹²⁰ Why did the FARC kidnap these civilians? The answer is because it furthered its objectives of undermining state authority. The application of Clausewitz’s analytical framework enables us to perceive the changing relationships between the identity of combatants, the repertoire of violence, and its purpose.

To paraphrase Summers, violence is violence is violence is violence. Searching for universalistic patterns does not change the fact that violence has but one purpose in war, to advance political objectives. In this regard, somewhat ironically, in seeking to advance universalizing explanations those like Kalyvas, Weinstein and Metelits neglect one of the few valid universal claims about the nature of war. In fact, all these studies exist in contradiction, because in the pursuit of the universal they become mired in the particular. Looking for patterns in individual instances of war will always trip up the analyst. Beyond violence for a purpose there are no reproducible patterns of war.

Understanding Clausewitz thus releases us from being mired in fruitless, and easily falsifiable, explanations for violence. More importantly, it permits the examination of violence at a far more disaggregated level. We can look at individual kidnappings, assassinations, homicides, bombings, and so on, and ask the pertinent questions. Who perpetrated the attacks? What effects were they intended to have? Did they achieve these goals in practice?

In the case of FARC, its repertoires of violence ultimately possessed one singular purpose, to achieve its political goals. Utilizing this framework in conjunction with an appreciation of the role that narcotics played in the Colombian Civil War we can discern the underlying purpose in FARC's strategy. This understanding prevents a descent into a nugatory political versus resource-based conflict argument and allows for an appreciation of FARC's involvement in narcotics. FARC undoubtedly put much effort into generating income from the drugs trade, but with the essential purpose of furthering its objectives against the Colombian state.

Coca and the FARC

The previous section has established why the Clausewitzian framework is relevant to FARC and the wider Colombian conflict. Of course, Clausewitz did not have any comprehension of the many variables that emerge with involvement in the production and trafficking of narcotics.

Narcotics were the proverbial game changer for FARC, creating a unique conflict dynamic, which Richani refers to as a “war system.”¹²¹ Regardless of what one calls it, this dynamic is not a pattern in a global series of modern civil wars and has not been replicated in other conflicts.¹²² The extent to which FARC became involved in the narcotics industry informed its strategy, including the employment of violence against civilians.

As well as being a potent source of revenue, narcotics brought FARC into contention with other armed groups, which fostered a set of circumstances particular to the Colombian conflict. Paramilitaries such as the AUC and BACRIM had a broad right-wing political ideology and at times were only loosely distinguishable from the Colombian government and armed forces.¹²³ The conflation of the paramilitaries and government forces presented a pitfall for a number of universalistic studies.

FARC’s involvement in narcotics should not be seen to denote a simplistic binary between “political” and “criminally” motivated violence. However, when looking at violence against civilians, a distinction between armed force directed towards furthering FARC’s commercial interests in the drugs trade and more directly focused violence centered on advancing its political interests can be made. The universalistic studies this discussion has examined often do not account for this distinction. There are certainly difficulties in discerning what might constitute narcotics related violence from the violence of the wider conflict. Data on this subject is not easily quantifiable. Nevertheless, an appreciation of the importance of FARC’s involvement in narcotics and the similarities they bear with other drug-trafficking organizations is fruitful.

From a purely economic standpoint, the revenue generated from narcotics is one factor that helps explain the longevity of FARC’s insurgency. In 1998, Richani estimated that FARC accrued US\$180 million from the *gramaje*. Given how integral narcotics became to FARC’s development, it raises questions as to why academics have not properly scrutinized the impact this industry had on its violence. Metelits’s “active rivalry” hypothesis did examine FARC’s

conflict with the narco-traffickers, but the broader universalistic theories she sought to purvey did not fully comprehend the effects on FARC's repertoires of violence. To gain an understanding of how narcotics permeated the FARC's organization, this section will assess how the governance institutions of the FARC reflected its involvement in the narcotics trade.

The governance arrangements of any armed non-state organization will inevitably affect its functions and capabilities. In this respect, FARC's internal organizational composition bears comparison with a number of ostensibly criminal drugs cartels, and suggests similarities in the employment of violence towards non-members. To illustrate, this study will examine the parallels between FARC and *La Familia Michoacana*, a contemporary Mexican cartel based in Michoacán.

From the late 1980s onwards, FARC began to exhibit analogous characteristics with criminally motivated non-state armed groups the world over, with violence and coercion being exercised against the state or private individuals to support commercial activities.¹²⁴ In this respect, FARC possess similarities with other drug-trafficking organizations in South America, an understanding of which assists in explaining a number of aspects of its violence against civilians. In *Social Order of the Underworld* Skarbeck discusses how non-state actors can define and enforce property rights more effectively than state institutions because they can rely on local expertise and information.¹²⁵ This is certainly true of FARC, which performed the role of the state throughout most of the territories it controlled. Skarbek argues that the need for criminal non-state actors to facilitate social cooperation is of great importance in order for contraband markets to operate effectively.¹²⁶ An inability to establish alternative systems of governance merely creates incentives for the local community to cooperate with government agencies or competitor organizations. Thus, it stands to reason that some of the FARC's violence against civilians was intended to sustain the day-to-day management of the coca plantations. Violent acts were perpetrated with the intent to improve or protect its business.

Here the parallel with *La Familia Michoacana* (LFM) presents itself. LFM started as a small community organization that grew into one of the most prominent drug trafficking cartels in

Mexico.¹²⁷ It also generated revenue from extortion and kidnapping, with many local businesses in the Michoacán region paying for “protection services.” LFM’s structure bears comparison with FARC. It is ruled from the top by an executive council; a second level middle management coordinates; a third tier consists of territorial managers, cell leaders, and regional and municipal cells that specialize in specific tasks.¹²⁸ LFM divides its territory into *plazas* but we could easily supplant that nomenclature with the FARC term “*bloque*.”

LFM lays great emphasis on internal cooperation. Upon recruitment, new members must undergo intense indoctrination. This includes cleansing members of any drug or alcohol addiction.¹²⁹ LFM has a strict code of conduct. Violation of the code carries severe punishment. Desertion has a blanket punishment of death “whoever leaves La Familia dies.”¹³⁰ FARC, likewise, also had strict indoctrination processes, which included regular lessons on politics. The movement stripped the recruit of personal property and discouraged sexual activity or relations between combatants. FARC was even known to encourage female combatants to have abortions.¹³¹ In the database found on a 58th Front laptop in 2007 there was a list of offenses committed by members of that Front with their respective punishment. Indiscipline, disorder or failure to maintain standards was met with chores. More serious infractions incurred reprimands (though it is unclear what these entailed) and a strong dose of physical activity. Desertion was always punished with the death sentence.¹³²

Both FARC and LFM stressed the need to foster positive relations with local communities. In Vargas’s study of armed non-state actors in South Bolívar he describes how FARC organized informal local assemblies just before local elections to deliberate and choose the winners *ex ante*.¹³³ FARC also collaborated with the peasants in protests against the government’s crop-eradication policies.¹³⁴ Similarly, LFM also provides the local community with private and public goods, acting as guardians of Michoacán and promoting themselves as models of religious piety as well as an economic benefactor.¹³⁵

Whilst LFM and FARC do have a number of affinities this must not be conflated to argue that FARC were “narco-guerrillas” or “narco-terrorists.” FARC’s ideology was based on Marxism whereas for the LFM, to the extent that it has an ideological outlook, is based on religion. FARC’s goal was explicitly political in contrast to LFM’s entirely narcotics based interests. Thus, parallels do exist in internal governance structures but the motivations for violence against civilians ultimately differ.

FARC always outwardly presented itself as being uninvolved in the narcotics trade at the trafficking level. However, in late 2000, an investigation into the 16th Front showed that that front was operating as a cartel. Steinitz describes how the 16th Front obliged farmers to report the number of hectares of the coca plant planted and harvest dates. The coca paste was then turned into cocaine, which was traded to a Brazilian trafficker Luis Fernando da Costa who supplied arms to the 16th Front.¹³⁶ Clearly, the 16th Front was not operating a simple taxation of coca production. It was creating the product and trading it across borders. In March 2002, the United States Justice Department indicted three FARC members for selling cocaine. Steinitz used this evidence to justify his description of FARC as narco-terrorists, even though this was not the norm for the rest of the movement. Undoubtedly, the 16th Front’s *raison d’être* became more about narcotics than politics. If one were to investigate the 16th Front’s violence against civilians in its territory it would be unlikely to reflect FARC’s political objectives.

This section suggests that FARC’s involvement in narcotics necessitates a distinct understanding of its violence against civilians. That the movement shared a number of institutional characteristics with prominent drug-trafficking organizations is not a mere coincidence. FARC learnt from its initial interactions with drug traffickers such as Gonzalo Rodríguez Gacha “El Mexicano” who created a private army, *Los Masetos*, to combat FARC in the late 1980s.¹³⁷ The movement developed a system that was reconcilable with its political ideals in the *gramaje*. FARC’s internal structures partly replicated other drug-trafficking organizations because the narcotics trade was used to facilitate its political objectives.

However, this does not mean that FARC was a criminal organization, and can therefore be typed accurately as “narco-terrorists,” as Steinitz has argued.¹³⁸ FARC was a revolutionary movement and the commitment to its overarching political goals constrained any conversion to outright criminality. As Saab and Taylor maintain, “for an armed group to transition into a criminal organisation, it would need to supplant its political motivations with a drive to pursue illegal profits.”¹³⁹ FARC never supplanted its political ideals with the “drive to pursue illegal profits” but the “drive” did bring it into conflict with paramilitaries, the government and civilians.

An understanding of its violence against civilians to facilitate FARC’s involvement narcotics must be considered alongside its more explicitly politically motivated use of armed force. This is necessary to inform a complete picture of FARC’s goals and strategy. But it also underlines a common weakness in universalistic micro-level studies, which are unable to address the extent of FARC’s involvement with the narcotics industry because the movement does not fit their theories. Consequently, they tend to conflate narcotics-related violence with violence more directly intended to advance political objectives. Invariably this leads to resource-based arguments, which either discount the political aims of FARC or else relegate narcotics to a criminal venture solely maintained for its revenue. Neither of these reductive approaches is informative when trying to understand FARC’s violence against civilians.

Conclusion

The aim of this analysis has been to demonstrate why universalistic micro-level studies of violence against civilians are inadequate in explaining FARC’s strategy in the Colombian Civil War. These studies endeavor to consolidate multiple instances of violence in individual conflicts into intelligible patterns for extrapolation across all civil wars. On a case-by-case basis, these studies are insightful. Further, to be clear, this analysis is not arguing that any attempt to develop mid-range level theories is inherently fruitless, not least because such studies offer conceptual

frameworks through which empirical anomalies can be identified. Consequently, even when they inevitably falter (as all theories must do under the principle of falsifiability), they still have value because they enable better understanding of some behaviors of some actors, some of the time. Nevertheless, the selling point of micro-level studies is the proposition that there are clearly detectible patterns in war. It is equally valid, then, for other analyses to discern where anomalies and incongruities exist in such theories. The argument here has, in this regard, discerned that the central problem of micro-level theories is that they seek to generalize their observations in order to create a universal hypothesis. At that point these theories break down. This study has shown that in their attempt to universalize, they mischaracterize the nature of war and the context-specificity of civil wars.

The alternative theoretical framework advanced here is a response to these universalistic micro-level studies. It avoids looking for patterns at a micro-level and seeks to comprehend FARC's violence against civilians through the dual-plane of politics and narcotics. This understanding is useful because it separates two different aspects of FARC's violence. It highlights the interactions that FARC's ideology had when it encountered the lucrative narcotics trade. On a macro-level, these factors are inter-dependent. But when examining FARC's violence against civilians, we can recognize that whilst such acts of violence may appear on the surface to bear comparison with other civil wars, the reasons underlying the violence are not. A Clausewitzian approach allows us to understand that violence in war is always purposive and is an extension of the political instrument. Differentiating FARC's politically directed armed force from that used to manage its involvement in narcotics is analytically useful. As this study has shown, the two have different motivations and should not be conflated.

In utilizing the Clausewitzian framework the point of this paper is not to imply that the thinking of Carl von Clausewitz offers us the single truth that shall miraculously liberate us from false thinking. We do not speak from a position of Olympian detachment, which would indeed be a manifestation of false thinking. The Clausewitzian framework is ultimately just like any

other: a falsifiable thesis that offers limited insight and understanding. What this paper is arguing, therefore, is not that there are no permanently operating variables in war, *per se*, simply that – thus far – no alternative theory of war, or critique, has succeeded in surpassing the Clausewitzian paradigm for its parsimony and elegance. In this manner, the evaluation set forth in this paper has employed Clausewitz’s ideas to demonstrate why micro-level studies of violence are unsatisfactory. Looking for universalistic patterns to explain violence against civilians in conditions of civil strife is a Sisyphean task. Violence against civilians is complex. It can be proactive and reactive. It resides in the decisions and actions of individuals who can be motivated by many different factors. Emotions can affect violence. So too can surroundings and circumstance. The Colombian Civil War is no exception to this and demonstrates that ultimately there are no reliable, reproducible, patterns of conflict, micro-level or otherwise.

Notes

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³ See Amelia Hoover-Green, *Repertoires of Violence against Non-combatants: The Role of Armed Group Institutions and Ideologies*, PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 2011.

⁴ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2006), p. 11.

⁵ Claire Metelits, *Inside Insurgency: Violence, Civilians, and Revolutionary Group Behavior*, (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 84.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

⁷ Ricardo Vargas, *The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and the Illicit Drugs Trade*, Transnational Institute Policy Briefing, 7 June 1999. Available at <https://www.tni.org/en/briefing/revolutionary-armed-forces-colombia-farc-and-illicit-drug-trade> (accessed 23 June 2017).

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- ²⁶ Ortiz, "Insurgent Strategies," p. 137.
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